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**COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES
COMMISSION ON HUMAN RELATIONS**

Enriching lives through effective and caring service

March 3, 2009

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**ATTN: SACHI HAMAI
EXECUTIVE OFFICER**

**FROM: ROBIN S. TOMA
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

**REPORT ON CHURCH VANDALISM OF FEBRUARY 2009 IN THE CITY
OF LOS ANGELES**

Sometime between Saturday evening, February 7, 2009, and Sunday morning, February 8, 2009, unknown person(s) vandalized, including obscene graffiti, and stole from St. Mark United Methodist Church.

On February 10, 2009, the Board of Supervisor approved a motion by Supervisor Ridley-Thomas to establish a \$10,000 reward for any information leading to the apprehension and/or conviction of the perpetrator(s) responsible for the burglary and vandalism of St. Mark United Methodist Church located in South Los Angeles.

Additionally, the Board directed the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission (County HRC) to look into the crime and report on their assessment of the incident as hate motivated and any recommendations that may apply.

The County HRC's inquiry and assessment of the crime analyzed two issues. First, whether the results of the criminal investigation thus far indicate that prejudice based on religion, or any other protected status, was a motive for the crime against the church. Second, regardless of whether it actually was a hate crime or not, we assess whether there is a church and/or community perception that the crime was hate-motivated, which would then potentially require intervention such as rumor control, community education, and addressing adverse impacts on affected

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communities, such as group concern, fear and anger that they are being targeted for hate crime.

The results of our inquiry and assessment follow below:

NO EVIDENCE OF HATE MOTIVE IN CHURCH VANDALISM

Here is a summary of the crime details: Sometime between Saturday evening, February 7, 2009, and Sunday morning, February 8, 2009, unknown person(s) broke a stained glass window of St. Mark Church to gain entry. A drum set was stolen and several rooms were vandalized, including the sacristy, where the words "Jesus is the man" was painted beneath a large cross on a wall behind the altar, and obscene pictures were drawn on both sides of the words. Desks and miscellaneous material were thrown about in adjoining classrooms, nursery and food bank. Additionally, suspect(s) sprayed the contents of approximately three fire extinguishers throughout the area.

LAPD has not classified this as a hate crime at this time. The LAPD detectives investigating this crime and the South Bureau Commander believe that the perpetrator(s) may be young kids, given the juvenile nature of the crime, such as the theft of the drum set. This perspective is shared by Pastor Raphael of St. Mark.

Based on our analysis of all the factors, we agree with LAPD that given the available evidence, there is no basis to believe it is a hate crime. However, should there be an apprehension of the person(s) responsible for the crime, evidence of hate motivation might appear. (For example, any evidence that the suspect(s) were motivated to carry out the vandalism because of anti-Christian or anti-religious views, apparent in suspect's possessions, such as writings, drawings, materials, statements of family or associates indicating anti-Christian views.) In the absence of such evidence, or a derogatory message aimed at the church or Christianity (as distinguished from a disrespectful attempt at humor), it would appear that the police and pastor would be justified in believing that this is a case of juvenile vandalism and burglary.

GENERAL COMMUNITY PERCEPTION THAT THE CRIME WAS NOT HATE MOTIVATED

Even when police do not find evidence of a hate crime, communities and victims may hold the belief that they were targeted because of their religion, race, or other protected status. In such cases, community distrust of the police may develop or worsen, and/or community fears and hostility towards the suspected perpetrators' racial group may create intergroup

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animosities or tensions. Should that occur, community education and other forms of intervention may be warranted to address the harmful impact to a particular group or intergroup relations.

In this case, given what is currently known, the LAPD officials indicated that they have received no indication from the victim, church members or surrounding community perceive hate as the motivation behind the church vandalism and theft. St. Mark's Pastor, Eugenio Raphael, concurs with LAPD's views.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the County HRC's inquiry, the following is recommended:

Bring greater public attention to the \$10,000 reward: LAPD Detective Nemeroff noted his lack of leads in investigating the burglary, and proposed a press conference with the appropriate County Supervisor to highlight the Board of Supervisor's offer of a \$10,000 reward for information leading the arrest and conviction of the person(s) responsible for the crime against St. Mark Church. We agree that this could increase the probability of apprehending the suspects.

Continue to Monitor the Criminal Investigation: The County HRC recommends that it be allowed to continue to monitor the status of the criminal investigation should an arrest occur and evidence of hate motivation be uncovered. The Commission would also seek to monitor any changes to the church and/or community perceptions that this crime was not hate-motivated.¹

The County HRC will continue to work with St. Mark Church to monitor and assess any further incidents that may be hate-related.

If you have any questions or need further information, you can contact Robin Toma at (213) 974-7601, or Ray Regalado at (213) 893-0810.

C: William T Fujioka
Miguel Santana
Randi Tahara
Wendy Tait

¹ The County HRC has invited St. Mark's pastor to take part in the Commission's Interfaith Initiative and other relevant programming, and Pastor Raphael has participated.
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